

LEADERSHIP

What to Do When a Monster Shows Up at Work

*The scariest boss changes costumes several times a day.
Three ways to harness the beast — yours or someone else's.*

BY MARK THOMPSON



If only Halloween came just once a year. The only thing more frightening than a monster of a boss is one who changes costumes several times a day; wonderful one moment and a tyrant the next. That passive-aggressive, Jekyll-and-Hyde character claims never to intentionally kick the dog on days that suck, right?

And don't they always have a lame rationale for the over-the-top attitude?

It feels bad when you're bullied — so do you ever find yourself unleashing that same demon on others as you race to get things done? Here are three ways to harness the beast, whether it's yours or someone else's.

1. VIOLENT AGREEMENT

Amazon has taken a lot of heat about the pressure cooker of reinvention and innovation they've brewed, but Jeff Bezos thinks the New York Times is missing the point. When you're a fast-growing company with ambitious leaders, the best teams are passionately engaged in achieving outcomes — as you must be in order to have the grit to survive inevitable naysayers and rejection.

If you ask Bezos, he believes that “it's natural that everyone who shares the mission is ferocious about what's possible,” and therefore it's easy to be unaware of the temperature rising in the room. When you care a lot about something, it's tough not to be down-right volatile. If you're feeling you're not heard, or fear that what's valuable to you might not prevail, it's seductive to become the bull in the china shop — or witness alpha executives launch a stampede.

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— JEFF BEZOS

The good news — and the hardest thing to remember about the eruption — is that the issue may be that everyone is in violent agreement about the mission. The trick is to tilt the energy back toward the issues to be solved rather than making it personal or resorting to name-calling.

You don't hire creative teams to be yes-men, Bezos insists. “Often the greatest value is a big debate about what's right and how to do it,” so this is a high-quality problem. People value being heard even more than they need to agree with you. So it's time to stop, listen and make sure to direct the fire and ice at the problem and not the people engaged.

2. TOXIC FRIENDS AND RELATIVES

Letting go is a hard thing for high achievers because we're so accustomed to persisting until we win. But do we have to win at everything all the time, no matter the issue, large or small? Successful people choose their battles wisely even when the risk seems greatest.

General Gale Pollock, the first woman Army Surgeon General (ret.), remembers as a child con-

fronting her dad, who was threatening her mom with a belt and knife. “Real men don't hit women!” the little girl stamped her feet with authority. He backed off, and Gen. Pollock and her mom boldly created a new life without him.

As bad as it gets, it's often difficult for us to let go of the people who may have had huge impact on our lives. But there's evidence that to persist in caring for those who abuse your relationship is dangerous, and there's increasing risk over time that they poison your other relationships.

Boston College researchers studied over 1,000 adults, among whom about 19 percent reported physical, verbal or sexual abuse as children, and over 9 percent reported neglect. Sara M. Moorman, a sociologist and co-author, discovered that caregivers who continue to serve abusive relatives are at risk of depression and other serious health issues. Worse yet, when we're overwhelmed, the chance increases that we will treat others poorly in a remorseful cycle of bad behavior.

19%

Of 1,000+ adults in a Boston College study reported abuse as children — and caregivers who keep serving abusers risk depression.

110

Nations where the author surveyed high achievers over 20 years for “Success Built to Last.”

3

Ways to harness the monster: violent agreement, toxic ties, and the ghosts of the past.

3. GHOSTS OF THE PAST

It can be painful to take our power back from those who were important to us if they become destructive. And it takes conscious, courageous effort to be aware of the insecurity that awakens whenever our values feel threatened. Either way, abandoning ghosts of our past helps us avoid infecting our team at work or poisoning our loved ones with that old nightmare.

“Our wake doesn’t drive the boat, nor should it determine its direction.”

Parents are important characters in our story, but our personal history was never intended to fatalistically determine the future. Our wake doesn’t drive the boat, nor should it determine its direction. No custodian stakes a valid claim on how we choose to live as adults, no matter how deep the perceived obligation.

We’ve all experienced the abusive power play from a boss, parent or partner used to prey upon our good intentions in ways that deserve no moral victory. No one

holds the right to kill another person’s dream, especially when the bullies covet something they themselves failed to conceive or achieve.

A LEGACY WORTH CELEBRATING

In our research with Wharton and Stanford for “Success Built to Last,” I asked high-achieving executives in 110 nations about their definitions of success over a 20-year period. The study underscored how ambitious people impose their individual impact on the world, for better or for worse.

Based on the choices they make and the vision they embrace, their impact emerges as creative rather than destructive if they focus on what can be built in the future rather than rehearsing the past. Instead of judging, rehearsing or reinforcing history — something over which we have no control to change — the best executives ferociously solve problems and engage their teams in creating a life that matters. That’s the only legacy worth celebrating. ■

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Mark Thompson writes about how leaders drive engagement, change and innovation. He is a New York Times bestselling co-author of “Success Built to Last” and chairman of the Chief Executive Alliance.



Mark Thompson is co-author of *CEO Ready: What You Need to Know to Earn the Job — and Keep the Job* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025). Scan to find the book.